

# Vermilion

Vermilion

Ben Counter

It had the humanoid shape common to many intelligent xenos, but its four limbs and head made up the totality of its resemblance to a human being. The inner layers of its skin were bioluminescent, while the outer layers formed black flaps and ridges running along the front of its head and body. From the back of its torso and limbs hung thousands of half-metre-long cilia, quivering tendrils that, it was surmised, propelled it through the oceans of its home world much like the flagellae of single-celled Terran organisms. Its strange gnarled skin created hundreds of gills all over it, and gaseous respiration was achieved through twin pulsing air sacs in its throat.

It had no eyes. Its sensory input came from the pits along its arms and legs, which absorbed scents from its surroundings. It therefore knew exactly what was going on around it. It knew it was a prisoner.

The Imperial Fists had shackled the xenos in a drop-pod. The drop-pod stood in the centre of a shattered plain of crystal that reflected the rose-pink sun through a million broken facets. Bullet scars scattered multicoloured sprays of light, refracted further through the translucent pools of blood that had yet to dry.

Several other drop-pods, in the red and yellow livery of the Imperial Fists, stood, still smouldering. The twenty Space Marines of the strike force were grouped up around the landing site, keeping a watch in all directions.

And a short distance away was the Ordo Xenos Field Research Outpost, draped in bodies both human and xenos. The metal and flakboard watchtower made up the head of an installation that punched deep into the crystalline surface. Its doors had been blasted open and most of the bodies were heaped up around the scorched entrance. Jumpsuited tech-orderlies had been dragged out and butchered on the crystal plain. Gun-servitors had shot down dozens of xenos one servitor was still trundling back and forth, training its autoguns across the battlefield.

We were too late, said Sergeant Ctesiphon. Two of his battle-brothers were hauling bodies out of the outpost and laying them out. Two more were heaping up the dead aliens, ready for immolation. Scout Nemeidos reports that none living remain inside.

Did Carmillas keep any live specimens? asked Librarian Deiphobus, the forces commanding officer.

It seems not, replied Ctesiphon. Nemeidoss squad will do a full sweep, but it looks like there are only tissue samples, not whole organisms.

Deiphobus knelt beside the body of a woman whose long blonde hair was half-scorched black. She wore carapace armour, tailor-made for her slight figure, and emblazoned with the stylised I of the Inquisition. One of her eyes was a fascinatingly complicated bionic, multi-faceted and apparently controlled by intricate clockwork. In life she must have been very striking.

We need to get the body to the apothecarion, said Deiphobus. Some inquisitors conceal datavaults inside their bodies. Back of the skull, base of the spine. Perhaps she saved her research.

Is there anything you can do? said Ctesiphon.

Librarian Deiphobus took off one of his gauntlets and held his hand over the dead inquisitor's face. He closed his eyes, and concentrated for a moment. The body is fresh, he said. Sometimes some consciousness remains. But not here. She is gone. All of her.

The other bodies were Ordo Xenos researchers. Most of them had some augmentation a bionic eye, or obvious cranial implants under a shaven scalp. Many had hands plated in heat-resistant ceramite, to help them handling dangerous samples. They had been killed with a mixture of small arms fire and blade wounds.

The xenos struck quickly, continued Deiphobus. It does not take a psyker to see that. We arrived but an hour after we received Carmillas distress signal and yet the battle was cold when we got here.

How did these aliens even know she was here? said Ctesiphon.

Deiphobus glanced behind him, at the sealed drop-pod.

There is a place, he said, where that very secret waits for me.

They staked out the xenos like a sacrifice on some primitive world. Each limb

was fixed to a post driven into the crystal ground. Its head was restrained, so it could not look away from Deiphobus as the Imperial Fists Librarian stood over it. The pink sun glared down into its face.

Squad Ctesiphon surrounded the alien, their boltguns ready.

These heathens slaughtered an inquisitors entire personal staff, said Sergeant Ctesiphon. At the first suggestion of danger, you will each put two rounds into this aliens central mass.

I doubt that such will be necessary, said Deiphobus as he knelt beside the alien. But if I give the order, execute it.

Emperors luck be with you, said Ctesiphon.

The first thing we learn in the Chapter Librarium, replied Deiphobus, is that there is no such thing as luck. He took off his right gauntlet and placed his hand against the aliens forehead. Creatures with approximately human form tended to keep their brains in what passed for their heads. Deiphobus felt an unyielding cranium under the layers of rubbery, spongy skin.

He closed his eyes. He let his mind sink back away from his senses, imagining his consciousness draining out towards the hind-brain where the instincts of a human still remained, not quite erased by a Space Marines training.

He imagined a black ocean, torn by storms and endlessly deep. He fell, as if from the deck of a ship, and plunged into that ocean. The input of his senses the faint whining wind of the crystal plains, the smell of gunsmoke and dried blood from the battlefield, the feeling of the armour encasing his body fell away, separated by an increasing stretch of liquid darkness.

Down here, in the cold and blackness, strange things lurked, as they did in the lower reaches of a real ocean. They were the rogue thoughts, instincts that a Space Marine ignored and the random outputs of a psychic mind. These were parts of himself that Deiphobus had discarded. Cowardice, a lurking predator, had been banished here, for a Space Marine was hypno-doctrinated to know no fear. The concerns of a normal man, for which a Space Marine had no time, were here too a shoal of them, petty worries and fears that dominated a mans mind. Deiphobus had once had a family, and down here the memories of them remained, ignored by the warrior. He had lived a life cut short in adolescence,

when that youth had died and the Space Marine been constructed in his place.

Now Deiphobus sunk to the bedrock of his mind, the architecture from which all his thoughts and faculties hung. Here he had built, over years of meditation and study, the fortress from which he could conduct his psychic operations.

Deiphobus did not need to imagine the fortress of his mind, for he had built it in such detail and clarity that it rose up to him unbidden. Its command centre was a great circular room with a throne from which he could observe the whole fortress, and which had a hundred doors each leading to a different mental landscape. The fortress's armoury had dozens of weapons and suits of armour, studied artefacts of the Chapters past with which Deiphobus could arm himself when the mental interrogations became hostile. There were even rows of cells winding deep into the rock, where certain memories were held that were too important to forget but too dangerous to give free rein in his mind.

Deiphobus coalesced in the command centre, seated on the throne. The image of his mental construct looked much as the real Deiphobus did then, the armour perhaps a little more polished, the face perhaps a little more youthful, looking as Deiphobus had when he first built this place.

Outside this fortress, beyond the limits of Deiphobus's own mind, was the aliens' consciousness. Hostile territory that Deiphobus had to invade. Each door in this place led to a different concept of that mind, which Deiphobus could navigate in search of the enemy's secrets.

A human had that same basic architecture as Deiphobus himself. Deiphobus knew it well, and could use that to help him make of that mind a place he could search and battle through. But an alien's mind was something else. Other xenos were psychically toxic, their minds coated with mental poison. Deiphobus's interrogation entailed a risk that this alien might be just one such psychic deathtrap.

Deiphobus selected a door. It opened, and darkness was all he could see beyond it. A clashing, buzzing sound reached him, his mind's interpretation of the alien's surface-thought static. Perhaps it was the sound of the alien's fear.

Deiphobus dived through the door. He gave himself burning wings to keep him aloft, and armed himself in the heavy gilded breaching armour he had seen displayed on the Phalanx.

He slammed into a wall of inchoate bedlam. It was madness. It was formless and unyielding. It was alien.

Deiphobus struggled to keep his self-image intact. It might dissolve in this chaos and leave him an unthinking, unfeeling particle, lost in here. He might never find his way out. He forced his armour to become more solid and heavy, layering more armour plates onto it until it resembled nothing that had ever been worn by a Space Marine. He imagined anchors dropping, finding purchase in the mire to lock him in position.

He was becoming less like a man and more like a battleship now, a space-bound machine of war. Deiphobus seized on that idea and now an armoured prow faced into the winds of formless matter that hammered at him. His anchors held him fast.

Deiphobus fired from the cannons of his battleship and blasted clear the area around him. It was scoured empty, resembling now the void of space.

Now Deiphobus took the aliens mind and made from it planets and asteroids drifting around him, like the spacescape of an inner solar system full of young planets. He did not think he had enough control yet to conjure up a star to light this system, so he bathed it in a hard yellow-white light that glared down from nowhere. It was not perfect, but it would have to do.

Deiphobus lay at anchor, searching through the alien nebulae that glowed in every colour. Somewhere, there was something he could use, some common point of reference between this aliens mind and that of a human.

His spaceship was not faring well. Cosmic winds were stripping away the gilt and revealing pitted steel underneath. The hull was beginning to disintegrate. Deiphobus could feel his orbit decaying, and the light from the nebulae and the stars was bending as the forces of this strange cosmos bore down on the invader.

Deiphobus let the doorway form again behind him and left the void behind. He coalesced again in the throne room of his fortress, letting his consciousness slip back into the familiar form of an Imperial Fist. That door closed, but now it had a window in it looking onto the voidscape Deiphobus had created from the formless mass. He locked the door with a silver key, and so that mental construct was locked into his memory, stored to be withdrawn and used later.

The Librarian held up a hand. His armour was, like the hull of the ship, scored and stripped down. Between the segments of his gauntlets he could see his finger bones, clean of flesh.

Deiphobus let the fortress drift apart, stone by stone, as he rose back towards the surface.

The bodies were burned, and the smoke discoloured the sky for miles around. Its reflection caught the crystals, so even they looked dirty.

Deiphobus watched the heap of corpses burning as he emerged from the drop-pod. Already there was little in the heap that could be recognised as either human, or as belonging to an alien of the species that still lay shackled inside the pod.

Librarian! said Sergeant Ctesiphon, who was overseeing the pyre. We are ready to leave. There is nothing left on this world for us.

Did Inquisitor Carmillas yield up anything? asked Deiphobus.

It does not look like it, replied Ctesiphon. She had a data storage implant, but it contained only instructions to transmit an astropathic death-code in case the body was found. She is stowed on the shuttle. The apothecary might find more, but my gut tells me there will be nothing.

Then stow the xenos, said Deiphobus. We will be back in orbit within the hour.

What was it like in there? asked Ctesiphon.

Alien. It was all I could do to force a foothold.

It will give up the answers, Librarian.

Ah, said Deiphobus, but the answers to what? Even the most talented psyker cannot sift through the entire contents of a sentient mind. Answers are not always the biggest challenge.

You need to know what questions to ask, said Ctesiphon.

Very good, my brother! This alien will keep all its secrets if I do not know to

look for them. I will go through the usual, of course. What it is. What it was doing here. Recollections of the battle. But there is one question I would like to answer very dearly, and I fear it is that answer it will guard the most tenaciously.

Both Deiphobus and Ctesiphon were looking at the pyre now. Ashes were blowing away. Soon only a few white embers would remain, by which time the Imperial Fists would have left this lonely world behind.

Why, said Ctesiphon, was this alien the only survivor?

That is the correct question, brother, said Deiphobus. Have it restrained in the shuttle. I shall continue in the Nerve-Glove Hall.

The Imperial Fists strike force finished their work and embarked onto their shuttles. Above them the shape of the Fate of Stalinvast hung, picked out bright silver by the systems sun. In a roar of engines they left that world which had never had a name.

Deep into the forest, life seethed everywhere. Creatures something like insects, but with scales and the darting cunning of something warm-blooded, skittered across the broad wet leaves. The ground was alive, consisting of a mass of oozing amoebas which writhed through the black loam. The sky was alive, heavy with clouds of wisp-like life forms that rode the air currents before falling in drifts to drain anything they touched of blood. The air that Deiphobus breathed was alive, with microscopic parasites competing to force their way into his bloodstream first.

Deiphobus trudged through the thickening vegetation. It dragged at him, trying to suck him down into the murk. It was up to his thighs, the slurping of the squirming mud like the sound of hungry jaws churning.

Around him, titanic remains of some xenos city decayed into the darkness. They looked grown more than built, great biological shapes of smooth stone now broken up and tumbled by invading roots. Something that might have been a face, or perhaps an image of a moon boiled in solar blazes, loomed over him through the dense canopy. Great stone staircases lead up to nothing. Once, it had been something magnificent, the kind of sight that could convince a man that the aliens who lived here were gods.

What, said Deiphobus, can we conclude from such a place? His self-image here

was that of an Imperial Fists Scout, with lighter armour that afforded a lower chance of getting bogged down or stuck. He used a Scouts combat knife to slash and saw through the worst of the foliage as he forced his way onwards.

Fallen from grace, he continued. Though he seemed here to be talking to himself, in that fortress at the back of his mind his words were being inscribed on tablets which could be filed away with the rest of his crucial memories. Once there was an empire, now no longer. But that does not mean this xenos is weak. They have known civilisation, and they lost it, and a species does not always do so unwillingly. Though their empire has fallen, they have not tried to rebuild it. Whatever they are now, they have chosen to be.

The ground in front of Deiphobus gave way and he stumbled forwards. Suddenly an acidic light was shining down on him. The sky was a boiling orange, dominated by the red giant star that burned across fully one-third of it.

A path cut straight down through the jungle, as if carved by a laser from above. The ground was dry and solid, unlike the quagmire elsewhere. Deiphobus looked up and down the path, but it curved out of sight.

This is the first world the aliens mind gave to me, he continued. Not a barren place, to act as a firebreak, but a place teeming with life. Its mind seethes. It is intelligent, but perhaps does not have complete control over its own mind. There may be parts of it the xenos itself does not know. But the path itself is the most interesting. It means

Deiphobus froze in mid-word. The movement he had spotted in the corner of his eye was not that of an insect or jungle predator. It was too deliberate, too calculated. It was human.

Deiphobus whirled around, drawing a bolt pistol. Inquisitor Carmillas stood behind him.

It was not Carmillas. She was dead. But the likeness was good. Her eyes were a little wrong, for the light behind them was not a glint of human emotion but a literal light, glowing as if the inside of her skull was on fire. Her fingers had too many joints and they did not all bend the right way, so the hand that gripped the hilt of her ornate power rapier looked more like a tentacled creature clasping its

prey.

Carmillas lunged. Deiphobus turned the point of the rapier with his own blade but the rapiers power field discharged with a crack like a gunshot in his ear. The knife shattered in his hand.

Deiphobus drove a shoulder forwards into the inquisitors midriff. She shifted to her back foot but held firm.

What are you? snarled Deiphobus.

Xenos within perimeter beta! gasped Carmillas in reply, speaking not to Deiphobus but to someone who wasnt there.

Deiphobus drove the remains of his shattered blade up into the inquisitors stomach. The blade found a seam in her flakweave body armour and slid up into her abdomen.

It did not feel like it should. A Space Marine knew well what a knife felt like as it cut through skin and organ, and grazed against the spine and ribs. Carmillas was more like a solid mass, spongy and multi-layered. There was not enough blood. Not nearly enough.

Deiphobus put his shoulder under the inquisitor and threw her over him onto the ground. He followed up with a slash at waist height, further opening up the ruin of her torso.

Her face showed no pain. She looked more angry than anything, as if the wound was an insult. Break open the armoury! To battle stations and repel them! Do not let them into the anatomy theatre!

She lunged at Deiphobus, and her arm was jointed wrongly. The elbow bent the wrong way, the shoulder unfolding and giving her an extra joint that turned the point of the rapier under Deiphobuss guard. The point punched between his ribs and speared him right through the torso.

The pain was real. Deiphobus gasped down a breath, and the effort tore open two of his lungs further. The power field burned out a great channel of burned flesh and organ. Red flashes burst in front of his eyes as one of his hearts was ripped apart and his nervous system plunged into shock.

But he was not dead. This was not real. He was not a Space Marine. He was a mental construct, psychically projected into the mind of an alien.

For a moment, the thought created a break in the pain. He could move, he could act, for another half-second longer.

He spent that half-second ramming his combat knife up into Carmillass throat. He twisted the blade and her head came off, revealing a shredded mass of grey-brown matter resembling the flesh of the xenos itself.

The inquisitor which was not an inquisitor at all, but the aliens concept of a human being slumped to the ground. Deiphobus looked up at the sky and saw it was turning white. The blood was draining from his eyes and the world was greying out. It lost its shape, for the only thing keeping this world resembling a jungle was Deiphobuss own willpower.

Deiphobus fell to his knees. He would have to give up on this projection. The xenos had been ready for him this time. But he had found out enough.

The jungle disintegrated, and Deiphobus was yanked up through the freezing ocean as his self-image exploded into a million shards of colour.

The apothecarion of the Fate of Stalinvast was dimly lit and cold. Many battle-brothers had breathed their last there, and their names were carved into the walls. This wing of the apothecarion was the Nerve-Glove Hall, and several devices, looking something like human-shaped casts split in two with their interiors covered in circuitry, were ranked in rows down the centre of the room. The nerve-glove was a tradition of the Imperial Fists to anyone else it was a torture device, but to an Imperial Fist it was a means to express the strength of body and mind that Dorns example had instilled in them.

Deiphobus sat beside the autosurgeon unit on which the alien lay, its wrists and ankles shackled. The alien was comatose it appeared dead to the sensors of the autosurgeon, but Deiphobus knew better, for its mind was still alive.

Librarian, said Sergeant Ctesiphon, who stood by the doorway. You are awake.

Most astute of you, brother, said Deiphobus. He was aware that sweat was running down his face and his hand still hovered over the xenoss skull. He withdrew his hand and pulled his gauntlet back on. How long have you stood

there?

Long enough to know the xenos is putting up a fight.

It is, replied Deiphobus. But there was a path.

A path? Does it mean something?

Everything in there means something. Deiphobus stood. His body ached. Every muscle must have been tensed. Have you news?

Techmarine Krusse found something else in the data-medium from Carmillass body.

And?

It was hidden, but in such a way that a standard Imperial tech-seance would find it. It was a single word.

And?

Vermilion, said Ctesiphon.

Deiphobus thought on this for a moment. Vermilion, he repeated, as if searching for something concealed in the sound. Nothing else?

Nothing else.

How far are we out from Beati Magnis?

The crew say five days.

That should be enough. Deiphobus looked down at the alien. It was disgusting. All aliens were, but this one had something particularly foul in its near-human proportions. They know of us and what we look like. said Deiphobus. But they know nothing of our anatomy. Carmillas may have been their first contact with humanity.

Do they pose a risk? asked Ctesiphon.

Hopefully not so great a risk, said Deiphobus, as we pose to them.

Deiphobus picked up the path as a deep channel scored through a charnel heap the size of a mountain. In the distance, more mountains rose, stretching off in a mighty range that seemed to touch the purple-black sky seething overhead. The bodies were those of the same alien species whose mind Deiphobus was traversing. They were all different, their skin a different hue of grey and brown, their facial features arranged in a different manner.

This was not a sight from the aliens imagination. Deiphobus had performed enough interrogations to tell the difference between fantasy and memory. The xenos had seen this once. It had witnessed mountains of its own dead. But the path had not been a part of that memory.

To traverse this region of the aliens mind Deiphobus had taken on the form, not of a Space Marine, but of a hardy Missionary, a leather-skinned wanderer leaning on a gnarled staff. He wore the once-white robes of the Missionaria Galaxia and his every step jangled with the gear he carried, enough to keep a man fed and sheltered through whatever wilds he might have to cross.

The watchtower was ahead, where the path finally ended. It was obsidian and jade, squat and powerful, a bastion against the wind that howled through the heaps of xenos dead. The door was a solid black slab with a single gap at eye level.

Deiphobus banged a fist on the door. A pair of eyes appeared at the slit. They were human eyes.

Speak the word, said a mans voice.

Vermilion, said Deiphobus.

A few seconds passed. The door swung open. Deiphobus walked inside.

Out of the wind, it was warm. Light came from a circular hearth in the centre of the room. A few medicae orderlies were tending to wounded soldiers. Imperial Guard by the look of them.

Deiphobus knew their wounds never healed. The orderlies work was never done. They symbolised the sacrifices made to put this place here, nestled so deep in the aliens mind that without a path, no one could ever find it again.

Inquisitor Carmillas sat by the fire, washing soiled bandages in a wooden pail of blood-pink water. She was not in her formal inquisitors garb. She wore a long white dress, already stained with the soldiers blood. Her belt held a sword not a power weapon but a functional warriors weapon. Her hair was down around her shoulders. Deiphobus noticed she did not have her bionic eye. Perhaps this was how she had looked when she was younger.

Inquisitor, said Deiphobus. I have come here to speak with you.

I am afraid, replied the inquisitor, that I do not have much capacity for conversation. I am a psychic construct of the Carmillas, not the inquisitor herself. I am as she was in her unguarded moments, and I understand the likeness is very good, but aside from a few simple interactions I am unable to speak in her stead.

That will not be necessary, said Deiphobus. I imagine her psykers programmed you with the information I must request. I need to see the protocols with which this xenos was implanted.

Of course, said Carmillas. She stood and wiped off her bloody hands on a cloth.

Gleaming black slabs of crystal rose from the floor.

OBSERVE, Deiphobus read from one slab. The words were carved in High Gothic. WAIT, GAIN TRUST, AND RETURN.

Another read, BE SILENT ON MATTERS OF MANKIND.

BE AS A SLAVE TO THE EMPEROR, read another.

I see, said Deiphobus. This is as I suspected, but it is good to be certain. Were you given any knowledge on the xenos itself to impart?

I was, replied Carmillas. Her eyes left Deiphobus and she seemed to be focusing far away. The xenos has a cyclical notion of existence. Their attitude to civilisation reflects this. When their society reaches a pre-determined level of sophistication, they cast down their civilisation and put their cities to the torch, regressing to a feral existence. They then build up their civilisation again until it is time to cast it down once more. The xenos are currently towards the beginning of this cycle, approaching multi-system capacity. This species threat level will

increase, and their reaction to contact with the Imperium is unknown. She turned back to Deiphobus. Is this response to your satisfaction?

It is, inquisitor, said Deiphobus.

Is there anything further for you here?

No, said Deiphobus. I have all I need.

Then good day to you, said Carmillas. The soldiers wounds must be dressed.

Into the shattered crag of Misers Peak was carved a chamber lined with lapis and gold, lit by a chandelier of pilgrims skulls. A great throne stood surrounded by choir-servitors, their hooded, hunched forms kneeling in eternal supplication.

Here the air was chill, for this world was too far from its sun to permit normal human habitation. That fact helped keep it secret, for if there was one thing the Inquisition valued, it was secrecy.

On the throne sat Lord Inquisitor Vortz of the Ordo Xenos. His regal robes were of glistening loxatl hide and his armour was cut from the bones of a dozen species. He was an old man, and his breath misted in the freezing air.

His interrogators and explicators stood at attention beside his throne in the scarlet uniforms of his personal army. Vortzs presence was such that his underlings might as well have not even been there.

Deiphobus nodded in salute. He stood at the foot of the throne, a place intended to instil the observer with a sense of awe and inferiority to the inquisitor. Deiphobus felt neither. Behind him, Chapter serfs wheeled in the gurney on which the alien was strapped.

Lord Inquisitor, said Deiphobus. The Space Marines of the Imperial Fists make common purpose with your Holy Ordos. We have brought you the xenos recovered from Inquisitor Carmillas outpost.

So I see, said Vortz. We were dismayed to hear of the death of Inquisitor Carmillas. She was once the most promising interrogators in our service, and in later years earned great praise from her brethren as an inquisitor. Pray tell, Librarian Deiphobus, how did she die?

In battle, said Deiphobus.

That is something, at least. My explicators will receive the alien from you. And thus is our business concluded, in the name of the

This is not a simple xenos, said Deiphobus. Though Vortz was probably not used to being interrupted, even a man of his pride knew better than to take a Space Marine to task for it. I have delved into its mind, continued Deiphobus. Carmillas left information in datastores within her body in case she died with the aliens mission unfulfilled. Her psykers built within its mind a set of commands of which it would be unaware. It was a spy, Lord Inquisitor. It was programmed thus to gather information on the aliens civilisation and report it back to the Imperium. But her spys fellow xenos tracked it down to acquire it by force, and in the battle the inquisitor lost her life. And all of this, I suspect, is of little surprise to Lord Inquisitor Vortz. Does not your own staff of psykers represent one of the Imperiums finest resources in matters of the alien mind? Did not Carmillas learn from you?

Vortz thought about this. Unease, well-disguised, passed over the faces of his underlings. It is what I would have done, he conceded. This species has been turning up in mercenary bands around the Ghoul Stars. Carmillas was eager to discover what danger it presented to the Imperium.

They despise civilisation, said Deiphobus. When their own grows to great, they burn it to the ground and start anew. When they look on the Imperium, it is with whatever passes in their minds for hatred. Watch them, Lord Inquisitor. This specimen will help you. They are savages, but they were not always so.

Deiphobus turned and left the presence of Lord Inquisitor Vortz, leaving the xenos in the throne room.

Deiphobus, wearing the image that most resembled his physical self, slid the volume of memories into its place on the shelf. This was the library of his memory, a vast and shadowy place, on the shelves of which every interrogation was carefully filed away. Some memories were gemstones arranged carefully in display cabinets, or paintings hung on the walls, but most were books like the one in which Deiphobus had contained the memories of his interrogation of Carmillass spy.

Is this one mine? said Inquisitor Carmillas.

It is, said Deiphobus.

Carmillas was much as she had appeared in her sanctuary in the aliens mind, although now there were no bloodstains on her dress. She had tied her hair back, as well, and looked a little more demure and official. Might I read it?

You may.

My thanks. And, Librarian?

Inquisitor?

I cannot help but see how empty this place is. I take it that you do not make it a habit of bringing in new guests?

Mostly the minds I examine have less savoury inhabitants, replied Deiphobus. And I do not relish having them run loose in my mind. But you deserve to be remembered, inquisitor. And besides, this place has become rather overfull during the years. It needs a proper curator. If that work is not beneath you, inquisitor.

Of course not, replied Carmillas or at least, the memory that Deiphobus had of Carmillas, furnished by the echo of her he had met. How many of us can help serve our Emperor after death? She look around and tutted. This place is a mess, Librarian. You need me.

Then I shall leave you to your work.

I think that would be best.

Deiphobus let himself fade away, the image he wore becoming translucent, then ghostly, and finally no more than a shadow. He felt the cold and heaviness of his physical body around him again.

He left all that remained of Inquisitor Carmillas in his mind, tending to the volumes of his memories.